

LAMENTATIONS

Four Folk-Plays of the American Jew

by
ALTER BRODY
Author of "A Family Album"

WITH A FRONTSPICE BY
HUGO GELLERT



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HUGO
GELLERT



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To

MY MOTHER

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Huebsch, New York

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LOWING IN THE NIGHT

An Invisible Play

CHARACTERS

A MAN'S VOICE

A WOMAN'S VOICE

SCENE: *A bedroom back of a candy store in the Bronx.
It is about midnight and the lights are turned
off.*

Ah, good to dismount from one's legs after a long
day at the counter! Ninety-seven dollars and thirty-
four cents in the cash register—not so bad for a rainy
Sunday, God be thanked!

Did you bar the store door?

I barred the store door, I put away the money, I iced
two vanilla and one strawberry can for to-morrow, I
put out the garbage, I banked the furnace for the
night—anything else, my pretty little sergeant?
May I take my shoes off?

Take your great big stupid head off! Go to sleep
and leave me alone. Everything is a joke to him.

Folk-Plays of the American Jew

Who's joking? It's no joke having a wife like mine. Try to joke with such a blister on your tongue!

Hear him squeal—just hear him! Poor persecuted pig—got himself a nag of a wife and she doesn't give him a chance to rest his fat buttocks! If you didn't pasture yourself so well, maybe it wouldn't be such a task to stand on your legs. . . . Go, drag them into bed already, and stop smearing salt on my wounds.

Who smears salt on a herring? Oh, what a salty piece of herring you are— If I weren't a Russian and didn't just dote on herring. . . . Come, come, turn around and give us a kiss for an appetizer. . . .

There! Keep your paws to yourself and don't touch me, or I'll jump out of bed!

If one can't touch one's own wife, whom is one to touch? I appeal to you—is that justice? Come, turn around and let's be friends to-night. After all I'm a relative of yours by marriage. . . . What's this . . . my little birdie-eyes chirping in the dark . . . chirping tears in the dark . . . I thought there was something wrong. . . .

Do I have to ask your permission?

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Lowing in the Night

But where is the calamity? What happened to-day? Nothing, except that your mother was here, and that's nothing to cry over. She's *my* mother-in-law, not yours.

You're a big cow—that's what happened.

A little while ago I was a pig, and now I am a cow. Try and get women to be reasonable. "If grandpa were a grandma, the roosters would hatch." At the worst I may be a bull, but I can't very well be a cow. And besides, that happened forty years ago. Other-wise things aren't so bad. Business is fine. True, you have to help me at the store, but God granting a good customer, we'll sell it soon and invest our money in a nice little apartment house. And then we'll take a regular flat, and you'll be able to sit home like a lady.

And what will I do home . . . play with my dolls?

Is it my fault. . . .

No, it's mine!

There you go—twisting my words before they even leave my mouth. . . . Have I ever reproached you? Do I send you to doctors? Do I suggest operations? You know what I've said: If God gives us a child

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Folk-Plays of the American Jew

I will rejoice. Who will deny it . . . cheerful having a little reptile creeping around the house . . . would give one more appetite for business, I suppose—something to lie for and scheme for the way others do—one gets ambitious. . . . Besides, when I think of all the whippings I got from my father—at least if I could pass it on to my son! But if God denies it to us . . . well . . . I suppose He knows best. Who knows! Children aren't always blessings. It was my mother's favorite curse: I wish you no harm, my son, only that you should grow up to be a father and know what it is to have children!

So I can account myself lucky. Fortunate one that I am, and don't know it! What am I crying about? Let's thank God instead and pray that I remain childless!

Laugh if you like . . . but God knows our lack . . . God knows what is best.

Everything is for the best with you, my saint—you have a good word for everything! Whatever God gives, whatever is fed into your mouth, you're satisfied. Why? . . . because you're a cow. I curse, I weep, I devour myself over things. But you chew on contentedly—nothing wanting, nothing lacking. . . .

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Lowling in the Night

So be it. Maybe you think I'm abashed? We're all cows before God, and whatever He gives, that we have to chew. The clever ones and the stupid ones. Even your smart uncle Irving, who thinks he's fooling the whole world. We're all cows before God, only to each one his cud tastes different. To some sweeter, to some bitterer.

And if my cud tastes bitter to me, why should I keep it in my mouth? Why! I am tired of chewing straw . . . I am tired of it all. To-morrow you'll call up the broker's and we'll sell the store to the first customer that comes along. I've washed enough soda glasses. From now on I want to live—you hear—I want to live!

Sh . . . sh . . . the whole block will be listening to you! You make me feel I'm murdering you—shrieking at me that way. . . . Can I call up the brokers in the middle of the night? To-morrow the first thing in the morning I'll call up. . . . There . . . you have my word. Can I do anything else!

Nothing. . . .

Turning over for a cry again! Grudge me the satisfaction of seeing you stop a while!

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Folk-Plays of the American Jew

If only she wouldn't come mourning over me every week. . . . One would think I was dead and buried already, by the way she looks at me. . . . As if it was my grave she's visiting and not me. . . . All because I can't turn out a baby for her every two years, like my sister-in-law. . . . One would think I owed it to her—promised her grandchildren and cheated her out of them!

Your own mother!—Is it ill that she wishes you if she wishes you a child? Besides, she hasn't uttered a word about it.

Oh, no—she doesn't say anything! Only she comes in with that resigned, sad face on her—as if she expects nothing from me, and is reconciled to her fate. . . . One would think I wasn't a virgin when she married me off. . . . the way she's afraid to look me in the face when she talks to me! And when she does lift her eyes at me, it's as if I was a photograph on the wall—stands staring at me the way she used to stare at Jake's picture when he was in France. If I'm such a sorrow to look at, let her stay away. Let her go to her daughter-in-law's, where she can enjoy herself.

A mother lusts for her daughter's happiness. . . .
Is it a crime?

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Lowing in the Night

But what does she expect me to do? Am I hiding anything from her in my womb? Must I tear open my belly and show her that I am an empty cask? And haven't I done it for her! . . . dragged myself from office to office to be handled and felt around by the doctors, till I feel like a chunk of meat in the butcher shop, and not like a decent woman. . . . had myself cut open on the operating table and searched for my blemish—the way she searches the entrails of a chicken. So I'm not kosher! So I'm not fit to bring Jews into the world! Divorce me and get yourself another wife.

What do you want of me? Who's reproaching you? As for your mother—you yourself kept the operation a secret from her, for fear she wouldn't permit it. And now you talk as if she drove you to it

Of course, she'd have moved heaven and earth to stop me. . . . but I know what's in her heart. For fear I might die under the knife, and she feel guilty! But in her heart of hearts she thinks one should stop at nothing for the sake of a child. . . .

But not to risk your life! How you talk! Aren't you a child too, to your mother, and dear to her?

A precious life I have to lose! What sort of a gift, is it, that I should treasure it so! What'll I do with

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it? Another thousand dollars in the bank, another fur coat, another piece of jewelry! But what good is it, if under all the furs and silks and jewels that you may heap over me, I feel like a pole—like a dry, dressed-up pole. . . . She's right. . . . I might as well be dead!

See how you toss around . . . back and forth . . . forgetting your own words.

She's right! She's right! One should try! Maybe another doctor . . . maybe another operation! Oh, I would have myself chopped into little pieces if it would only help! . . . Gladly! God! God! have pity on me! Remove my shame from me and don't let me live like a stone! Even if I die in childbirth . . . even if I never live to see it! Just to feel it inside of me . . . just to carry it in my womb. . . .

Enough now . . . let yourself alone . . . or you'll tear your mind loose. . . .

It hurts . . . it hurts . . . you don't understand how it hurts!—Every minute of the day. . . . They troop in and out of the store with their children. They flaunt their riches before me, and I have to admire! . . . Swallow my bitterness and find something sweet to remark about each one. . . . Twist

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Lowling in the Night

my face into a smile for each one as I wait on them. . . . But all the time my heart is twisted like a clenched fist. . . . Not that I hate the little ones, but that I have to hold my heart back! To-day just before mother came, the druggist's little boy walked in. . . . He struck his finger at the showcase . . . such a chubby little finger, sweet and sticky like a piece of candy itself. . . . "How much is this?" "Three for a penny," I glowed back at him, bending over him as in Russia one bent over the charcoal-pot on a frosty morning. . . . "How much is three?" . . . There was no one around. He was so soft and sweet and helpless. I had such a wild desire to catch him up in my arms, and stuff him inside of me and make him mine in some way. . . .

And do you think I have a raisin for a soul—dried and without juice in it? I also am human, and dreams go through *my* head too. I may be stupid—not like the smart salesmen from the wholesalers who know how to banter with women, and think they can cajole you into buying anything from them . . . but I have a soul in me too. . . . Nice to have a little bandit in the house! Sometimes my heart pinches a little when I sell a pair of roller skates to a youngster, and help him put them on. . . . But one catches one's breath again and shrugs it off.

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What's the use! Can one force God's hand if He's not willing? Each one has his own portion. What's for others is for others . . . what's for us is for us.

For others to worry how they can stave off a baby . . . for me . . . to hold my arms open . . . and nothing comes! For others to rid themselves of them like vermin . . . with poisons and all sorts of horrible contraptions. . . . While I . . . I . . .

Enough for to-night! Enough! Starting yourself again?

Enough for to-night! Enough! . . . I must save some for to-morrow night . . . and all the nights to come. . . .

You are young. . . . God may rejoice us yet . . . why should you talk that way?

Young! I am the young one and my mother is the old one—but what use is my youth? I feel like a dead branch sticking from her heart. Can't green like the others—an evil wind break it off—but sticks there uselessly . . . sticks there, like a planted pole!

You are not useless to me. . . .
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Loving in the Night

Yes! Yes! I know what you need me for . . . only don't—don't touch me! It's become tasteless and disgusting to me . . . the whole thing! Just a bed pan for you to empty your lust in . . . that's all! You ought to be disgusted with it yourself . . . after all the doctors had felt me and poked me and carved me—that you should want me any more. . . .

May I never rise from this bed, if I thought of such a thing! It's not that one always wants. . . . Don't you think I feel lonely too sometimes? I also am childless. . . . The years fly—how many more are there left? What comfort have we got for our old age, but each other?

Yes, fatty, I know it's hard on you too . . . but I feel nasty to-night, and can't help myself. . . . Just let me alone.

I can't leave you alone. I can't listen to you gnawing your heart out, and just turn over on the other side as if you were a mouse in the wall.

You have a good heart, fatty, but I'm not worth it. I am a cross little girl to-night, and nothing pleases me.

You're *my* cross little girl, and you can be as cross
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as you like with me. See . . . I am not lonely . . . I am not childless, if I have you. You are my child, my little daughter . . . saucy and sweet as any high school girl . . . bossing her fat old father about the store . . . making him do this and that . . . scolding him to her heart's content. And sometimes I'm your mother . . . your fat old mother, who gets fatter and fatter with watching how pretty you're growing. And every time she passes a dress in a store window, she thinks of how nice her little girl would look in it. And every time she passes a restaurant, she thinks of some delicacy she might make her.

It's good to have you, fatty. Sometimes you do feel like a mother . . . with your big, flabby cheeks, and waddling, flat feet, and great, soft hands . . . so strong and gentle. I've been a cross little girl to you . . . hard to please . . . but you've always been patient. I'll try to be patient too. . . . I'll try to be your good little girl, and maybe we can be happy.

You've always been my good little girl . . . my dear little girl!

Your selfish little girl, that never stops to think of *her* little boy. . . . I've forgotten all about him and he never says a word! . . . Doesn't he need a

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Loving in the Night

mother too sometimes . . . even such a big boy? Doesn't he ever wish he was somebody's little boy? My big little fat boy, that everybody makes fun of because he is too good-natured to mind . . . that everybody thinks stupid because he lacks a malicious tongue. . . . Come to my arms, my fat little boy . . . come . . . come . . . come . . . Oh!

My dove . . . my darling . . . my sweet one. . . .

No! . . . go away! . . . don't . . . don't . . . don't . . . beast! . . . beast! . . . beast! . . .

CURTAIN

RECESS FOR MEMORIALS

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS

TWO OLD WOMEN.

CANTOR.

BEADLE.

CONGREGATION.

SCENE: *The women's gallery of a synagogue on the Day of Atonement.*

NOTE: *This play centers on an intimate dialogue between two old women in a crowded synagogue, during a recess in the services. In the expediences of production, both for economy and for sharper relief, the rest of the congregation would have to be relegated to a mass of blurred figures on the backdrop. Voices of cantor, beadle and congregation come from off-stage. When the dialogue between the two women opens, the praying subsides into a faint, chanted hum.*

CANTOR: Suffer our prayer to come before Thee, O Lord, and withdraw not from our supplication, for we are not so boldfaced as to say we have not sinned

[*Beating his breast.*]

—yea, we have sinned!

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CONGREGATION [*beating their breasts at each confession*]:

We have robbed, we have wantoned, we have glut-toned;

We have comforted ourselves wickedly!

We have lied, we have slandered, we have betrayed;

We have erred and led others into error!

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Be so good as to forgive me, neighbor, and turn to the right page for me. I've lost my place again!

SECOND OLD WOMAN: With the greatest of pleasure. There. Almost at Memorials for the Dead already. They'll soon be having recess for Memorials.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Length of life to you, neighbor. I don't even know your name and I keep bothering you so . . . like the villagers at home who must have their prayers read for them. Thank God, I can read a holy word, but you know how it is when the heart is too full. I try to keep my eyes on the page, but they keep drifting away from me all the time. The tears start and they just drift away from me.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Yes, yes, one feels like crying. So pleasant to sit in this beautiful synagogue, with

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Recess for Memorials

the golden chandeliers like crowns over your head, and let yourself cry a little, while the Cantor is pleading for you with the Almighty . . . to cry a little as you follow him—every word melting in your mouth like a piece of candy: "Who to live and who to die, who by fire and who by water, who by famine and who by pestilence and who by the sword!" Good to be reminded we are in God's hands to-day—to inscribe in His book or to erase. . . . But let me ask you, if you won't take it amiss—aren't you familiar to me, neighbor? Seems you sat beside me before, one Day of Atonement . . . in that pew near the window . . . years ago, I remember . . . with such a pretty daughter!—She's not here to-day?

FIRST OLD WOMAN: No . . . not here to-day. . . .

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Well, you can't blame them. It's hard on the children. Would you believe it—when I was a girl, my mother had to watch me like a convict on the Day of Atonement, that I shouldn't steal away from her and break the fast. How long the day seemed in the synagogue, and the pages of the thick prayer book turned so slowly, like dragging a load uphill. Every few minutes I kept bothering her: "Is it far to the evening prayers?" And now—as you see me alive—if this day would only last forever. . . . Who knows of hunger, who

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knows of thirst? What greater pleasure can there be than this—just to sit here over your prayer-book, among fellow-Jews, and forget your sorrows while they are in God's hand.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: When I look at you—how patient you are under your affliction, troubling not even God on high about it—I feel like a sinner in Israel. I know you have enough to cry over, too. It was your husband . . . at the New Year Services . . . while he was blowing the ram's horn. . . .

SECOND OLD WOMAN: May one not be tested to all that one can get used to! Thirty years already that he has those attacks. Argue with the Almighty! We must accept as good all that comes out of His hand. Only every New Year, I say to my husband: "Why do you forget who you are? Why do you forget that you are liable to drop into a fit any minute? Give it up this year. They'll find somebody else who can blow the ram's horn." But he's so stubborn, my husband.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Full and whole as a nut to look at. Who would think it of him that he is a sick man? But my sorrow also is not for the eye.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Something ailing you, God forbid?

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Recess for Memorials

FIRST OLD WOMAN: If I felt myself around, I suppose I would find something. But who has time for such indulgence? Another few years. When you come to America they search you for illnesses, but in the grave they let you in without questions. It's not for myself that I weep . . . my daughter . . .

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Your daughter, poor thing! What's the matter with her?

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Nothing the matter and a lot the matter. O Righteous One, Righteous One! . . . too high a ransom hast thou exacted from me this Eve of Atonement. From the rest of Israel a dumb fowl that they twirl over their heads and send to the slaughterer. From me—oh what a ransom! . . . From the rest of Israel a dumb fowl that they give to some one else to slaughter—while I had to slaughter my child with my own hands. With my own hand I had to sign her away and seal her up in a living grave. She was taken away yesterday . . . to the insane asylum.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Went out of her mind! What a rip! A mother's heart should be wrought of iron—of iron it should be wrought, I say! But there, there, don't devour yourself so over it. Is she dead that you sing a lament over her? God's mercy is not yet drained. With God's help your

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daughter will be returned to you in good health. We're not in the wilderness. There are doctors . . . surely they must know something.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Once one has gone out of his mind! A broken dish you may piece together, but it's no dish any more. . . . If I could only convince myself that she's out of her mind, it would be bearable. Out of mind, out of sorrow. What good are our heads for, I ask you, but to butt the wall with! Even when we are sane! But no, it's not that—it's not as if she was just insane. . . . What am I babbling about . . . what am I beating into your ears! I'm out of my mind myself. It's not something to boast of, that one has sent a daughter to the lunatic asylum. . . . Only something drew me to you. . . . I don't know why. You sit by yourself so meek and quiet, tending your prayer book all day, while the women are gossiping around you as if it were a Circumcision Party—not a fast . . . something drew my overflowing heart to you. Forgive me, dear neighbor. It's to be read on your face. . . . Enough of your own tears have you drained, that I should bring you mine.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: There, there! What a trespass! Aren't we fellow-Jews for that? Only one can't speak to every one. The satisfied cannot understand the hungry.

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Recess for Memorials

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Golden words. My husband and my other children—grown-up men—fathers of families, God bless them—but talk to them! They've settled it in their minds that she's crazy, and persuaded me to send her away. But a mother's heart is not so easily hushed. True . . . the eyes she lifted at me sometimes . . . as if I were her slaughterer—instead of that freethinker by whom she is possessed—may his name be erased this day! But does a mother stop to strike a bargain with her love? I just have to bethink myself where I left her and the lid lifts off my brain! You remember the cattle fairs at home, when the children had to be kept off the streets—that's what that place is—a cattle fair, with human beings bellowing around you instead of horned beasts. And she—dropped into that stampede like a piece of butter on a hot pan. She whom we could not bring ourselves to touch when she was a child—so fragile it was . . . a harsh word and you felt as if you switched her with a whip. . . . She—dropped into that Lunatic Fair, to shift for herself. What's going to be left of her! But what could I do against them? They set themselves upon me with one cry: "Send her away. It's dangerous to sleep under one roof with her. You'll go off your own mind, watching she doesn't do anything rash to herself again. And what if she takes it into her mind to kill you, too?" But I know

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better. Can a corpse kill itself? That's how she can kill herself. Not to speak of worrying about myself. Ah, she slew herself long before. The first day she laid eyes on him she destroyed herself—and me, too.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: One of those love affairs, I suppose. Hard to raise up children these days! In Russia mothers used to worry about worms. "The child has a worm, poor thing." Here a child gets a worm into its brain, and it's a thousand times worse. Don't I know. I've been punished, too—with a son.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: There! You have a boil on your own neck, so you know how it feels. But the thought of it tears at my brain, and won't let go. It's not as if she was an ordinary child. I tell you: what we lifted for her—though it broke our backs to do it . . . sent her to high school and college! The other children didn't waste much time in school. Found themselves jobs . . . in stores, in shops . . . and to look at them now . . . what do they lack?—prosperous as the earth—pigeon-milk they could drink, if they fancied! But she—she's not for the shop, I said to my husband. She's not for the common stew. Let's treat ourselves in our old age. "And what do you expect to make of her—a school teacher, maybe?" And why not, says I. Can't a

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Recess for Memorials

school teacher come out of us? Have we such thick heads?

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Better a thick head and an easy mind. My son—everybody said he had a good head when he was young. But what it's good for, I don't know. Got it into his head he's a poet. Did you ever hear of such a trade? A teacher we know is a trade, a doctor, a plumber—but a poet! A trade to die of starvation! Anyone can do that! Only he thinks his sick father will live forever—just to support him.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: From such fine parents! There—can one tell where such things grow! A bitter fare to feed on in your old age. I know already what a poet is! I have found out what a poet is!

SECOND OLD WOMAN: I know my troubles. You talk about your daughter—I tremble for *his* reason too, sometimes. A man of twenty-two, and what do you think he does all day? Either he's rocking a library book in the rocking chair. . . . Or he starts circling around the table in the parlor, until I get dizzy watching him, like a horse in a treadmill—you'd think he was grinding corn. Only it's the poetry grinding in his brain. Catches him suddenly, like a fit, and you daren't say a word to him, as if he were in the midst of prayer. His father has fits

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too. You saw the pretty spectacle at the synagogue. But at least he doesn't make a trade of his misfortune. Twists out his agony on the floor, froths over at the mouth, and he's through. But he—he makes it his job. Scrawls and scrawls, and week after week mails it out—I don't know where he gets the stamps from—and waits for it to come back. Puts stamps inside the envelopes, so it should be returned to him! But where's the profit in the business? Unless it's some such American game. Once a child takes a wrong slant—woe to the parents. You can train a tree, a piece of wood, to grow the way you want it. But a child, a piece of your own flesh, you can't.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: And my husband blames it on the schools. Why did I have to send her to college! From the way he talks, you'd imagine she'd been growing up a heretic. I tell you: a little saint—she frightened me with her piety. There weren't enough commandments for her to observe. If she were a boy, the six hundred and thirteen observances wouldn't have been enough for her. Being only a girl, she sought out every observance a woman is eligible to. Took to it diligently, as she took to her school work and everything else. Lighting the Sabbath candles, burning the dough-offerings, purifying the meat, saying Grace, kissing the door amulet. . . . As for the Blessings—she never missed an oppor-

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Recess for Memorials

tunity—over bread, over water, over a new fruit, on getting up, on washing one's hands—there was always a blessing on her lips. And prayers—you know what one expects from a girl, particularly in America. If she says the thirteen "I Believes" in the morning, and the "Hear O Israel" before going to bed, it's enough. But no! She must say all of the prayers, like a boy. All week that child was breathless with waiting for the Sabbath, as if there was a guest expected with the most wonderful gifts. Scoured herself for it each Friday, like a woman cleansing herself for her husband after impurity—brushed the black hair tight against her skull like a wig—little grandmother they used to call her in high school, from the old-fashioned way she wore her hair. And when the Sabbath arrived—such ecstasy, I tell you—the child walked around on tiptoes, and spoke in a whisper, as if she were afraid to desecrate something.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Too good is an evil eye. I used to take pleasure when the grocery-lady remarked to me: "What a quiet, refined child your boy is. Never pushes his way to the counter, no matter how crowded the store is, but stands off, silent as a dove, until I take notice of him." Or when a boarder said: "Your youngest son—he knows ten times more than the night-school teacher. I could

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sit up all night listening to him, if I didn't have to go to work the next day. Better than going to the moving pictures." We had better take pleasure in them while they're young—before we know what shame they may heap on us.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Golden words! When my daughter entered college, her friends gave her a surprise party at the house, and I sat back and drew pleasure as from a well. Little did I know that my well was poisoned that very night. *He* was at the party—the Enemy of Israel knows who sent for him. That's when she met him—*her* poet. It is said: When the Angel of Death enters a house, the dying one hears the rustle of his wings. But when he entered my house, I didn't recognize him. At least, if it was something to look at, something to catch a girl's fancy. If one is to be buried, let it be a handsome tombstone at least. A monstrosity, I tell you, with eyes half buried in its head, squinting at every girl he was introduced to, as if he was trying to thread her through his eye. The girls wouldn't even notice him, so he started an argument with my husband: Did he know that Moses was the first Socialist? Of all the blasphemies! And do you think he didn't prove it from the Holy Writ? Uprooted all the Scriptures, like a swine with his snout. Turned every verse upside down to prove

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that Moses, our Teacher, was a Socialist. . . . And my daughter listening to all this—staring open-mouthed at him as at a conjuror. After the party my husband warned her: "Daughter, this is America—a land where our Holy Law does not flourish, where we Jews have become brutish and ignorant—little better than Gentiles! But ignoramuses are harmless. They sin because they don't know any better. Only beware of the freethinker. He baits his hook with a piece of Holy Script, and before you know it your soul is caught."

SECOND OLD WOMAN: To tell you the truth, I've resigned myself long ago about these matters. My son is a freethinker, too, and doesn't keep it to himself either. Many a heartache has it cost my husband, but for my part, if he only had an honorable occupation—let him be an ignoramus, let him be a skeptic, let him even work on the Sabbath—if only he would work. That's to what I have come down with my wares.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Need bends to anything. Don't you think there was a time when I was resigned to her marrying that pot of defilement! Would have shut my eyes and handed her to him . . . to save myself from worse shame. Isn't it written: "In sickness one is permitted even swine's flesh, if it is necessary?"

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SECOND OLD WOMAN: So. *He wasn't willing.*

FIRST OLD WOMAN: All he wanted was her soul—her young soul to render for its fat. Flayed it, as you flay the fat off a chicken to render for the Pass-over jar. And when he was through with her, he left the rest with me. And she . . . stuffed her with notions of free love as you stuff up a goose for slaughter, and she was satisfied.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Free . . . free . . . free it's a madness nowadays. In our town when the revolution broke out, there was a girl—one of the free ones—rushed to her father's barn: "Free . . . free . . . free! No Czar, no God, no master!" . . . and let out cows, chickens, horses, geese . . . a madness! But that a pious child like your daughter should go off that way. . . .

FIRST OLD WOMAN: When someone is fated to destruction one hankers after it as after some delicacy. Did we know what was going on? He dared not show himself at the house again, so he baked himself into a honey cake in the hearts of all her friends, and wherever she went, he was there. Took to escorting her home at night. Till one fine night, running down for some toothache pellets for my husband, I caught them together in the hallway.

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Everything got black in front of me, as if I was stricken blind. So that's for whom I was raising my child—my dessert—that's for whom I was saving it! Posted an amulet on the door to keep the demons out, and there is one with my daughter. Then and there I fell on my knees before her, and pleaded with her as you plead for your life, with a knife at your throat. She promised not to see him any more, but of what use was it? He had planted himself like a stone in her mind, and her thoughts kept turning back and forth, only to get caught again. Something pulled her to him in spite of herself. She tried to hold back. For hours, sometimes, she used to keep him waiting for her, because her heart held her back. I would catch sight of him waiting around the corner, as I was coming from somewhere, and I shrank within myself and hurried home,—as if the Angel of Death had accosted me, and told me to get ready. But he did not take it amiss. He knew what he was waiting for.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: The children step into slime and bring it home for their mothers. My son drags himself about with girls too, and I tell you it's an ache in my heart. A man who can't support himself—what does he want with girls! A hundred times have I run down to the drug store, thinking

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it was a telephone from my married daughter, and what was it?—a girl who had to speak to my darling good-for-nothing. You would think her life depended on it by the way she kept calling up. And where was he—hanging around somewhere with another silly.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: It's free love, so why shouldn't it be free? One to-day, another to-morrow. That's what killed my daughter—the free love didn't agree with her—choked with her mouthful of free love. And yet God in heaven knows she swallowed it with a heavy heart. In the daytime she quarreled with me over him, as if I was withholding a treasure from her . . . and at night—"Mother," she moaned one night in her sleep, as if someone were pinching her—"he bothers me!" But the next day she was gone, and the next night, sometimes—you know what it means when a girl doesn't come home to sleep.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: The same story . . . many a sleepless night have I spent over my son. . . .

FIRST OLD WOMAN: But your son is a man. He can't come home to you in the morning with a bastard inside of him. My cheeks flame to speak of such things . . . but there, I have spoken it. What have I left to hide? I was ashamed long enough. I didn't even dare to ask her where she spent her

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nights, for fear she would tell me the truth. What was I to do with her? Drive her into the street the way my husband wanted to, and make a prostitute of her?

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Oh, you've got to drive with a loose rein sometimes. My husband thinks that's the way to remove your shame, too. Throw it out for the whole world to see. But when I feed up in the newspapers on the shootings and killings that are going on! . . . And who are these gangsters? . . . children of the most honorable parents—boys like my son who can't put their hands to anything else. . . . So I warn my husband: "Drive with a loose rein. A man who has no trade in his hands. What's going to become of him if you throw him on the street? Let him remain a poet already. At least he won't harm any one."

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Oh, my friend, one can kill without a gun! My daughter was slain . . . yet no one shot at her! Surely as if he had fired a bullet into her heart, that poet of hers killed her—and to whom shall I cry out? . . . May his heart be laid waste as mine was laid waste, and may life turn sour on his lips, as it turned on hers.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: So! Deserted her—may God desert him—and she took it to heart? Only

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who am I to talk that way! Am I so at home in my own son that I can afford to curse? Who knows . . . maybe . . . what's brewing in my brain!—God forbid! God forbid!

FIRST OLD WOMAN: What is it, my friend? What's troubling you so?

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Nothing . . . a foolishness that's not worth repeating. The crazy things that can crawl into one's mind! But tell me, tell me, what was it that happened between them?

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Who knows!—the worms should know him—not I. All I know is that the letters stopped, and the telephones, and he stopped prowling around the house like a beast of prey. At first I thought it was a deliverance . . . to turn a corner without trembling lest the sight of him appall me. But when I turned to my daughter—then I looked into the face of my woe. He had loosened his claws—but what was left! Like a wounded bird she tried to take wing again . . . fluttered at all sorts of things, to lift herself from the ground . . . from trying to finish up her college, which she left off in the middle, to job after job. But nothing would stay with her . . . threw up everything as if her soul was nauseous. She even started to pray

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again . . . fell to saying the blessings over her bread, and to kissing the door amulet as she entered the house . . . dreamily . . . as if she were doing it in her sleep. There was no pleasure in it for me—as if a ghost were gibbering beside me, mimicking me. One morning, a Sabbath morning, as we were turning the corner, coming from the synagogue, we heard wild screams on the block. "Hear, O Israel! Moses our Teacher, Moses was a Socialist!" I ran to the house without feet, as if carried on air, but it was too late. A moment she stood there at the window, shrieking at the whole block that was running towards her. "Hear, O Israel, Moses our Teacher, Moses was a Socialist!"—and then she leaped out. . . .

SECOND OLD WOMAN: God be with us! With that mockery of the Holy Cry on her lips. Satan it was that twisted her tongue for her, when he pushed her to it.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Satan it was. That Satan of hers. Only a merciful God saved her from coming before Him that way—with that on her lips. Her skirt caught on a bar over the cellar-way, and her life was saved. But what taste has it got that she should want it? It is sinful to say it, but better a thousand times that she had been killed. . . .

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SECOND OLD WOMAN: Bite your tongue, foolish mother. A calamity, that one has missed death! Death is a host at whose house one is always welcome . . . whenever we come we'll be received . . . so what's the hurry? Long life to her father, and she'll get over it. There's nothing in the world one can't outlive, my friend, except death!

[*A thumping on the pulpit.*]

BEADLE: Afternoon services! Afternoon services!

SECOND OLD WOMAN: Afternoon service already. Closed my prayer book, and now I have to hunt for the place. Let us wish each other to-day, as all Jews do. . . . A happy year be sealed for you, this day. May your daughter be returned to you in good health, and may you yet dance at her wedding.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: From your lips to God's ear. Would that I could believe it, dear neighbor, but it's sweet to be comforted. A good year be sealed for you likewise. May your husband be restored to health, and may your son become a fountain of pleasure for you in your old age.

BEADLE [*thumping on the pulpit*]: Afternoon service! Afternoon service!

CURTAIN

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RAPUNZEL A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS

MAIKA SOREL—a girl of about fourteen.

RIFKAH SOREL—her mother, about fifty.

SHOLEM SOREL—her father, about the same age.

SCENE: *The kitchen of a Harlem flat opening on a square yard walled on all sides with tiers of rising and descending windows. Though small and crowded the room is well-kept and everything neatly arranged. Several pots are cooking on the stove. On the table near the stove are two loaves of dough, evidently waiting for their turn in the stove. The washub, whose top is covered with oilcloth, seems to serve as an extra table. A doorway leading into the other room to the left. Hall door to the right.*

MRS. SOREL, a short, rather stout-looking woman of fifty, stands beside the washub chopping fish hash in a large wooden bowl.

MRS. SOREL [*in a tired, petulant voice, punctuated by her chopper*]: Malka! You hear me, Malka!

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MALKA [*from the next room, startled*]: I . . . me, ma?

Mrs. SOREL: Reading, reading. All the time she sits there smoothing those books they send her. Ait what a crown for my old age. Malka!

MALKA [*from the other room, in a scared, shrinking voice*]: Ye-es, ma.

Mrs. SOREL: Did any one ever hear of such a thing? Only in this crazy country! The blind read with their fingers. Eggs hatched without hens. Horses ride in automobiles. Ai! Sometime I'll fall dead in my traces too, like that horse they picked up this morning. Then maybe I'll be freed from my load.

MALKA [*from the other room, in the same scared, shrinking voice*]: Y-e-es, ma.

Mrs. SOREL: If only she wouldn't read so much . . . maybe the Lord would have pity on her, seeing that she is blind and afflicted! But she, ever since they taught her how to read again—with her fingers . . . contented and happy as if she lacked nothing . . . back to the books like before, day and night, night and day.

[*Pauses a moment, then continues furiously.*]
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Rapunzel

But talk to her! Talk to a brick in the wall! All she knows is that she's blind, and need do nothing. And her mother . . . let her break her twisted hands chopping! Let her grate away her fingers on the wash-board, like horse-radishes. She must keep her fingers soft and delicate for caressing those books.

MALKA [*feels her way in, guiltily, from the other room*]: I wanted to . . . but you never let me. . . . Pll . . .

[*Gropes for chopper in her mother's hands.*]

Mrs. SOREL [*contemptuously*]: Go to! Go to! my handy one. I don't need your help. As long as there is some strength left, I'll pull the wagon. Sit down, and I'll give you some soup.

MALKA [*relieved, edging back into the other room*]: But I want to help you, mamma . . . but I'm not hungry.

Mrs. SOREL: Not hungry! What do you expect to get strength from? Maybe from those books of yours?

MALKA: I . . . I'm not hungry.
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MRS. SOREL: Sit down, sit down—no one is consulting you!

[As MALKA hesitates sullenly—with bitterness.]

A heart of flint! . . . That's right . . . punish your mother—punish her—the old nag!

[Changing her voice into a pleading whine.]

Malkale . . . precious mine . . . bird of mine . . . darkened life of mine—as if my own eyes had been extinguished in my head! Have pity on your mother and taste this delicious chicken-soup. Maybe it will bring some light into your eyes. As you see me alive—ten blocks I pushed my feet to the chicken-market. God knows I can't afford it even there. A bitter bite for my old age that I, Isaac Eisenstein's daughter, should have to haggle from booth to booth like a fishwife. But nothing is too hard for a mother. I say to myself: maybe she needs some indulgence, some luxury . . . a piece of chicken . . . an orange . . . I would turn my blood into gold, and pour it down her throat—if only it could bring back the light into her eyes. . . . Here, child!

[Pours some soup into plate.]

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Rapunzel

Just take it . . . jest sniff it. It smells up the whole room like frankincense.

[MALKA sits down sullenly.]

There, there. And don't make such a wry face. It isn't castor oil. God knows I'm no enemy of yours, child. I scold and curse! But is it I? It's my sorrows crying aloud in me. Each time I think I have more than I can bear, something new finds its way to my back.

[Goes back to her chopping. Half to herself.]

Other people have husbands—helpmates. However bitter one's lot, it's less bitter divided. But I—Oh, I have nothing to complain of; my parents fitted me out with a male, gave me a dowry, fixed up a store for me that was the sight of the market place. But the only kind of business your father ever did was exchanging stories with the synagogue do-nothings—about things that neither stood nor flew—as he must be doing this very minute!

[Stops chopping and beats her breast fiercely.]

But whom can I tell my story to! No one! . . . like a stone in the desert! If you only knew your mother's lot, child.

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[*Turns to MALKA, gesticulating, chopper in hand.*]

Before I could stand on my feet, I was loaded with burdens, and started off. . . . Always the big girl to my parents, ever since another baby was born! . . . always: it's all right, the big girl can attend to it. "Rifkahl!—when are you going to fetch a bucket of water from the wells?" "Rifkahl!—there's a churchful of peasants in the store—why don't you run over and help your father?" "Rifkahl!—you lazy thing, the cows will cross the Russian border before you get through feeding those chickens!" I suppose my parents—peace be upon them!—thought they were going to reward me—with a dowry and a husband. Little did they know they were putting another pack on my young shoulders. Ai, what a merry dance your father led me! First my Sorelle—peace be upon her—falls out of the hanging cradle, and crushes her head against a bedpost. Why? Because I was busy earning our bread at the store—and your father was busy telling stories in the synagogue. Then the cholera came! A twin—such fine boys! Then your father takes a stroll through Count Blitzki's woods, and, being good-natured, lends a helping hand to some peasants who were chopping down his trees. We had to unswaddle ourselves to the skin—store, and everything

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we had, to pay for it. Then in Columbus's Kingdom,—as if my cup was not full already—after saving my son from Czar Nicholas, there had to arise a Czar for me here. Oh, a gold star they gave me, for you, my son! May their star go out, like mine went out! And what comfort have I got from my other children? One of them married a husband like mine, who can make children, but can't feed them. And if your other sister has lifted herself out of her mother's penury, and, thank God, lacks nothing,—so she is childless all these years.

[*Pauses and continues with a sigh.*]

I pity my children. But do they pity me? God would not hold it against your sister if she lightened her mother's lot a little, so she doesn't have to share her house with strangers. But she doesn't understand, God forgive her—or doesn't want to understand.

[*A knock at the door; she exclaims sarcastically.*]

Aha . . . he is here—your dear father.

[*Opens the door to let him in, and steps back, surveying him with hands folded on her bosom; with mock obeisance.*]

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Come in, come in, Reb Sholem. Already through with your work? Weren't there any tales left to tell?

SHOLEM [*excitedly, ignoring her sarcasm*]: Rifkah, you must come with me there. To-morrow is Sabbath. After dinner we will take Malka, and we will all go there together.

Mrs. SORER: Have you gone crazy? There?—Where?—What!

SHOLEM [*ignoring her*]: Such a long time since I have felt some grass under my feet. Every day since we moved uptown, I pass that park on my way to the synagogue, but I'm always afraid to cross the avenue and go in. You have to take your life into your hands. To-day I saw my chance, and ran through the automobiles. How shall I describe it to you!—A garden of Eden! . . . just like the grounds of the Georgofsky Monastery in Biala . . . smooth silky lawns everywhere, like fresh-laid Sabbath table-cloths. Rows and rows of well-trimmed trees, as if they were carved out with a knife.—And would you believe it?—birches! You remember, Rifkah, on the highway as you ride out of Biala, how they used to flash through the trees on both sides, as if the woods were scrawled over

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with a silver pencil. Ah, fine, fine! A garden of Eden, I tell you. You want to linger there and never come out.

Mrs. SORER: Ah, Sholem, Sholem! When will you grow older! Upon my word, when I bethink myself, I say to myself: whom are you crying to! what do you want from him! He is fifty years old, but he is still a little boy. He has nothing, and he needs nothing. If he were allowed to play in the park with the other children, he would be perfectly happy. I know you, Sholem—that's how you were in Russia, and that's how you're here. Have I forgotten the pillow of shame that you slipped under my head at my very first childbirth? Where is Sholem—everybody asked. And where ~~was~~ Sholem—in the swamps fishing with the goseherds. But what's the use of . . . What's that piece of wood sticking out of your prayer-bag! Were you gathering fire-wood for next winter, in the park? Of you everything is possible.

SHOLEM: That's . . . nothing . . . a piece of willow. You roll it under a flattron, or something heavy, and the bark separates. Then you make little notches in the hollow bark, and it's a flute . . . for Malka . . . I thought for Malka . . . I would make a flute for her.

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MALKA [*lifts up her face eagerly from her soup*]:
Papa! . . . for me . . . a willow flute! The
gooseherds that you went with . . . do they play on
them to their flocks? In the books I read about Pan
. . . he's a god. . . .

Mrs. SOREL [*furiously*]: Give me that stick!

[*Sholem hands it to her shamefacedly*: Mrs.
SOREL pulls it out of his hand, and flings it
out of the window.]

You old, old fool! When will you get some sense
into your head? Did you hear what a loving father
you have, Malka? He brought you a piece of wood
from the park. Maybe if he had gone out and
brought some bread for his children like other
fathers, you wouldn't be blind now.

[*Looks at the clock suddenly.*]

Woe is me! Eleven o'clock, and I stand talking
with him. Soon the boarders will be beleaguering
the table, and the Sabbath is not half ready. Here,
my breadwinner, sit down and keep chopping the
fish, while I run down to the butcher. The third
time this morning that I drag my swollen legs up
and down the stairs, while you promenade through
the park.

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Rapunzel

[*Pushes chopper into his hands, puts on a
sheep, and hurries out. SOHEM chops with
clumsy deliberation.*]

MALKA [*lifting her face cautiously from her soup*]:
Papa, can you tell stories?

SHOLEM: Stories, child!

MALKA: Mama says in the synagogue after service
they gather round you, and you do nothing but tell
stories all day—about things that neither stood nor
flew. I wish I were a boy and could go there. It
must be wonderful sitting there and listening to
stories all day. Everything must be so brown and
quiet in the synagogue—a warm, brown quiet—soft
and smelling with a dreamy mustiness, like the big
velvet bag of your prayer-shawl. You know, papa,
when you leave it sometimes, I unbutton the bag
and bury my face in the folds of the prayer-shawl,
and inhale it like a flower . . . because it makes me
dream that I'm in the synagogue with you . . . in-
stead of . . .

[*Shivers as if with cold.*]

Papa, won't you tell me a story sometime . . . now
. . . about things that neither stood nor flew.
Papa, yes!—mama won't know.

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SHOLEM: Stories about things that neither stood nor flew!—you mustn't believe everything your mother says. Do you think one goes to the synagogue to tell stories? It's true you meet people there, and you're human like they, so you speak to them. Is it a sin to exchange a few words with a fellow-Jew?

MAIKA [*disappointedly*]: So you don't tell any stories in the synagogue . . . I . . . I thought . . . I'll tell you what, papa, I'll tell you a story . . . out of my book,—and you listen.

[*Runs into the other room.*]

SHOLEM [*calling after her*]: Don't bother me, child. I have no time for stories.

MAIKA [*comes back with a huge Braille book, and turns pages quickly*]: Oh, here is a story that you'll like. It's called *The Fisherman and His Wife*. Just like you and mama. You were a fisherman in Russia, weren't you?

SHOLEM [*scornfully*]: Fisherman! Who put such notions into your head! We had a store in the market place, where you could buy everything from a scythe to a pair of sandals. But read, read . . . let me see how you read with your fingers . . . let me see! Your great-grandfather Jacob—peace be

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Rapunzel

upon him!—became blind like you. But, you know, he never skipped his three pages of Talmud a day. I remember when I was a little boy, I used to lead him to his pew in the synagogue, and open the Talmud for him. "Sholem, my child," he used to say, "how far did we ride yesterday?" "To the middle of Chapter Sabbatical Year," I would answer. Then he would read aloud page after page, and tell me when to turn the leaf over at the end of each page. But then he knew it by heart.

MAIKA: I know this story by heart. I read it over again and again, because it makes me think of you and mama. But I don't know . . . because mama isn't greedy like the fisherman's wife in the story. If you caught a fish that was an enchanted prince she would never think of asking him for castles or palaces and treasures. But I think she would scold you for not bringing it home, so she could chop it up for Friday night. Wouldn't it be horrible if she did that—if it was an enchanted prince! But you didn't hear the story.

[*Reads.*]

"In a poor little hut down by the sea there once lived a fisherman and his wife."

[*Stops short suddenly.*]

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PAPA, in Russia, did we live in a little hut by the sea?

SHOLEM [*meditatively*]: Oh, there must be sea in Russia, because they used to say the Czar rules over five seas. But we lived on Gentile Lane, between the highway and the market place. How should you remember—you were an infant then. It wasn't a street like in America—only a wagon-rut between two-rows of peasant huts—but I wouldn't exchange it for all their proud paved streets. You walk through them and it's like walking through a prison yard. Everything is walled in and barred. The very earth is bound in stone, as if it were a convict. On my oath, I get dizzy sometimes—to walk, and not feel the earth under your feet. There everything is different. Everything is just right. The brown straw roofs grow into the sky, with the green trees—all of one piece—not like something stuck between heaven and earth like a bone in your throat. Here, if you want to see some trees and a piece of real naked earth, you have to go to the park, where they keep it fenced in with the other animals, as if it were a wild bear that's liable to escape. Ha, ha! You don't have to go to a park there, I tell you.

MAIKA [*with an eager laugh*]: And you don't have to keep off the grass, do you, papa? And do they give you peanuts free, too?

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Rapunzel

SHOLEM: Peanuts! That's foolishness! But for a penny you can get enough sunflower seeds to crack all day.

MAIKA: And you used to fill your pockets with sunflower seeds and go to the woods, didn't you, papa? But wasn't it dreadfully cold?

SHOLEM: Cold! What do they know of cold, here. A ripe Russian frost—you go out in the morning, and your eyes just glow in your head, like hot potatoes in your mouth.

MAIKA: Like hot potatoes in your mouth!—that's funny—that's just like Jack Frost in the books . . . he's full of tricks! And it's all white in winter, isn't it?

SHOLEM: All white in winter, and all green in summer . . . that's Russia for you. We don't hide our winters and summers in the park, so people wouldn't notice them.

MAIKA: Ooooh! But suppose it rained. Didn't it go through the roof,—if it was made of straw?

SHOLEM: Not through our roof! Only the peasant huts were made that way. But if you ask me, they were a thousand times nicer. Ah, Malkale, if you

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could only behold Gentle Lane at twilight, with the little low huts on either side, hunched under their great, peaked roofs . . . with ragged gable-ends, sloping way over their tiny windows . . . you know, . . . just like a lot of brown-shawled old beggar-women drowsing between the trees, with their heads on their laps.

MAKKA [*breathlessly*]: Yes . . . and they sit that way . . . Oh, ever so quietly under the trees, all night . . . but in the morning when the sun shines on their roofs, they throw off their shawls, and turn into a lot of golden-haired little girls playing on the ground.

SHOLEM: Oh, in the morning . . . where does one get such mornings again! Each time you got up, it felt as if it was the Feast of Rejoicings. You wanted to pick up the whole world in your arms, and run around with it, as they dance around the pulpit with the Scroll of the Law on the Feast of Rejoicings.—It was another world altogether—another earth and another sky. Here the sky seems to hang right over your nose—there's nothing to lift one's eyes to—all you have to do is to get on top of one of those buildings and stretch out your hand, and you touch it. No wonder it's such a godless country—how can God dwell in such a heaven? There, when you

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Rapunzel

looked up, you felt as if you were a little creature at the bottom of a great, blue sea . . . not stranded on the top of a barren, stony mountain. The earth was so wide, and low, and pleasant . . . a green pasture as it is written in the Book, . . . and the sky was so far up—but one felt nearer God that way. One breathed fresh air—God's own breath—which makes you healthy and humble—not the breath of your next-door neighbor, which inflates you with vanity. One didn't rush. One didn't worry. I used to say to your mother: why should one try to swallow the whole world? A peasant went away to another store for his latches?—the Lord will send us another. There are plenty of heathen in the world. But your mother . . .

MAKKA [*startled—as if to herself*]: Don't let's talk about mother . . . everything got dark again . . . everything hid itself again . . .

SHOLEM: Child, child! Such a face you have on you—you scare me, as I am a Jew—like when I found you climbing down the fire-escape in your sleep.

MAKKA [*with a strange stare in her eyes*]: I could almost see it . . . before . . . while you were talking to me . . . only quivering as through smoke . . . a green, endless field, with a million little

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brown roofs scattered in the grass like toadstools, and high over head, a sky full of overloaded white clouds, like ships carrying snow for the winter. That's how Russia looked like—I know! Then something whispered in my ear, look, look . . . but another voice, like a soft hand caressing my eyelids . . . kept warning me: it's dark, it's dark. Only I wanted so much to look . . . I wanted to see your face while you were talking to me . . . with my eyes . . . and suddenly, as if I had pushed a hand away from my eyes, your face swam up and quivered a moment in the smoke. I saw it with my eyes, papa—not in my mind, as when I touch it. Then I heard you say "your mother," and your face turned into a little mouse and jumped right into my eyes, and . . . everything grew dark again. Oh, I'm so afraid, papa . . . I'm so afraid . . . something terrible is going to happen . . . I shouldn't have looked! I shouldn't have looked!

SHOLEM [*takes her head in his arms, stroking it soothingly*]: Nothing but good shall befall. It's the finger of God, my child. In His own time He shall put forth His mighty hand, and liberate you out of darkness, as He liberated Israel out of Egypt.

MAIKA [*excitedly*]: No, no! I know, papa—it's the voices again . . . they talk to me, and I have
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to obey them. . . . Oh, I shouldn't have looked! I shouldn't have looked!

SHOLEM: Voices! What has possessed you, my child! What are you dreaming about!

MAIKA [*in a trance, half to herself*]: Oh, I don't know, papa. Only when I became blind . . . I remember I was lying on the sofa in the parlor, over a book of fairy tales, when suddenly I heard a singing-like in the yard: "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair." Just like a story I had read. . . . Only somehow I knew it meant me. . . . I knew I was being called to the window. . . . I couldn't hold back any longer, and, as if something was telling me what to do, I leaned out of the window, and let my hair down over my eyes. I leaned far out, until I grew dizzy, and felt myself falling into the yard . . . but the voice sang, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, close your eyes." I closed my eyes, and a voice, like a soft hand caressing my eyelids, whispered into my ears: "It's dark, it's dark." It felt like playing a game with yourself, only it was so solemn and thrilling. "Can I have three wishes?" I asked. "You can have anything you wish, if you keep your eyes closed." From the kitchen I could hear mother scrubbing on the washboard. But it sounded like a tune:
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"You'll never see your mother any more,
You'll never see your mother any more."

"Can I never see any one any more?" "No one can
come into your tower, unless he climbs up on your
hair," answered the voice. Then . . . Oh, then
. . . papa . . . I promised . . .

SHOLEM: What did you promise? Whom did you
promise? It's an evil dream, child, an evil dream!

MALKA: I promised,—and suddenly the voice sang,
"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, open your eyes." Then I
realized something must have happened to me, and
it was now all over. I opened my eyes fearfully,
afraid of what I might see in front of me. But I
couldn't see anything. "It's dark, it's dark," I cried.
But a voice echoed me softly: "It's dark, it's dark."
"Mother, mother," I cried, "I can't see." But the
echo answered: "Mother, mother, I will never see
you any more." I heard mother calling me. But a
voice answered in me: "No one can come into my
tower, unless he climbs up on my hair." Then
mother came in: "Malka, Malka, what's the mat-
ter?" But I didn't want to tell. I hid my face from
her. But she pulled my hands away, and looked at
me, and began to scream: "An evil eye has been cast
on my child." And all the neighbors rushed in . . .
but I knew . . . I knew what had happened!

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SHOLEM [*twining his hands*]: Woe is me! Woe
is me! What she has done to herself! It's an evil
spirit that you admitted into you, Malka, and he
locked himself up in your eyes. What is there to be
done? . . . where can one get your mother now?
. . . I'll call the rabbi . . . when one needs her,
she's not here . . . oh . . . oh . . . oh . . .

MALKA [*cowering, and putting her hands over her
eyes*]: No, papa, dear, don't tell mother . . . don't
call any one.

SHOLEM: Woe is me! Woe is me! The devil has
entered her, and she is shielding him with her own
hands. You don't know what you're doing, child.

[*Pulls her hands away from her face; she
shuts her eyes tightly.*]

Where does one get your mother?

[*Runs suddenly into the other room and
comes back with a Hebrew Bible.*]

Open your eyes and let them gaze at some Holy
Script. Open your eyes, and maybe he'll fly out of
them.

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MAIKA [*in panic*]: No, no! . . . not yet . . . I don't want to. . . .

[*Soothingly, as if to somebody else.*]

It's dark! . . . it's dark. . . .

[*Pauses and listens expectantly, then in a thrilling, singing voice—her face listening to herself as to a voice from afar.*]

Rapunzel, Rapunzel, close your eyes. . . .

[*Lifting up her face triumphantly, with her eyes highly closed.*]

No one can come into my tower . . . [*with a cryptic smile lighting up her face*] unless he climbs up on my hair. . . .

SHOLEM: Open your eyes, open your eyes . . . it's an evil spirit that's talking in you . . . open your eyes, my Malkale. . . .

MAIKA [*a sudden thought comes into her face. She opens her eyes slowly and looks up to her father with a wild eagerness*]: Papa! Let's run away—you and I—let's run away to Russia . . . where it's all white in winter and all green in summer.

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[*Door opens and Mrs. SOREL enters loaded with bags. MAIKA turns her head and catches sight of her. Terrifiedly.*]

Mama!

[*Runs to her father and digs her face into him.*]

I don't want to . . . I don't want to . . . it's dark, it's dark. . . .

[*Lifts her head and digs it again into her father's lap—breathlessly.*]

I see . . . don't want to . . . I don't want to. . . .

[*Despairingly.*]

Oh, I see . . . I see . . . I see. . . .

Mrs. SOREL: What has happened here! What has befallen the child!

SHOLEM [*excitedly*]: A miracle, Rifkah, a miracle . . . it was an evil spirit . . . the Lord has opened her eyes!

Mrs. SOREL: Do my ears hear? . . . Malkale! . . . Malkale! . . .

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[Runs over to her and pulls her hands away from her face.]

Look at me! . . . look at me! Do you see your mother?

MAIKA [*shrinking from her in terror*]: I see . . . I see . . .

Mrs. SOREL [*drags her to the door, opens it, and screams hysterically into the hall*]: Neighbors, good people, fellow-Jews . . . come here . . . come here! . . . See—she sees! . . . a miracle . . . see . . . God has reminded himself of me this day . . .

[Flings her arms out ecstatically, sinks slowly to her knees at MAIKA's feet—her face uplifted, her eyes half-closed in devout rapture.]

Rejoice with me . . . come to my festival, my friends . . . It's light again in my child's eyes!

[Neighbors throng around—SHOLEM, Bible in hand, stands by awkwardly, crowded aside by the fervency of her outburst.]

NEIGHBORS: As-I-live, she sees!
A holy miracle. . . .

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The Lord has had mercy. . . .

Look at her. . . .

There is a God yet in heaven. . . .

MAIKA [*trailingly*]: I see . . . I see . . . I see . . .

CURTAIN

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A HOUSE OF MOURNING
A One Act Play

CHARACTERS

ABRAHAM KULAK.

LEAH,—his wife.

DORA,—his feeble-minded younger daughter.

SCENE: Flat in a Jewish quarter of Brooklyn. Kitchen in the foreground, opening backstage on a partly visible parlor. In both rooms the chairs are backed against the wall, and grocery boxes are in their places. In the parlor, a tall mirror is covered with a sheet. In the kitchen, a shaving-mirror above the sink is turned to the wall. It is Shiva, the seven days of mourning prescribed by Jewish ritual, during which the chief mourners are supposed to sit on the ground only. In modern times, however, the original rite is satisfied by abstaining from chairs—hence the grocery boxes. To right, in the kitchen, is a window, and on the same side are the stove, over which is a two-burner gas range; the washub and the sink. To the left are an ice-box and the hall door. In the parlor, backstage, directly in the center of the background, is a window. The room is but dimly lighted by this single win-

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door, and an old-fashioned, non-folding type of sewing machine, which is beside the window, probably serves as the family reading table. Abraham Kulak is seated on a box in front of the sewing machine. Only his broad back is visible, and continues so throughout the play. His lowered head leans heavily upon his hands, which, in turn, are propped on the elbows, against the iron head of the sewing machine. His age is indeterminate, but there is something of the strength of a piece of masonry, in the expanse of his immobile back. LEAH, his wife, is in the kitchen, evidently preparing things for the evening meal. Although she is in full view throughout the play, her age is as indeterminate as that of her husband. Her face is that of a woman who has aged very quickly, and she might be anywhere from fifty to seventy. Her hair is white and scanty, giving a skull-like appearance to her little head. She is the mummy of a woman, but, in shrinking, her scowling face and hands have gained that sort of mummified hardness observable in old peasant women. Her voice is a high-pitched, rhythmic wail, which breaks off explosively at dramatic junctures, or when she falls to quivering or impersonating. She punctuates freely with her arms.

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LEAH [bends down under the wash tub, picks up some potatoes out of a box, and starts peeling them into a large pan. Chanting to herself]: Beefstew and potatoes, potatoes and beefstew—that's all your mother knows . . . too late to learn. "Let's have something new, mother—I'm so sick of it!" But what else does your mother know—your stupid, ignorant, old dolt of a mother. . . . Now you have something new to eat, my child—something new! Potatoes and meat, meat and potatoes . . . twenty-five years I stewed it in a pot . . . twenty-five years I watched the pot. A fine dish I have prepared for the worms, a fine dish, my beautiful one. Something new you craved for all the time . . . something lusted in you all the time . . . but what could my tired heart understand? In Russia—galoshes and parasols like an officer's lady. In America—God . . . knows . . . what! You stole five rubles out of the cash drawer to buy yourself a parasol, and we whipped you for it. In evil hands you fell, my child. A princess you were born, and you asked for silks and satins, but we gave you blows and curses. A princess you were—you picked up your skirts haughtily, as you walked among us—but how were we to tell! Because you took tribute from us, we called you a thief. Because you were beautiful, we called you a harlot. We reviled you, we cast you out from amongst us, like a strange reptile—but you came back to us, my lady . . . dead . . . dead.

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Death caught you at last, my beautiful lady. You were so full of life . . . you were so afraid of death. . . . As one who has a treasure to guard, so you were afraid of it. You could not bear the sight of blood. When you pricked yourself with a needle, and saw a drop of blood on your finger, you fainted away. When you swallowed a pit you were terrified. Rosy cheeks of mine—puffed and pink with blood—Death has sucked himself full on you now! A pit you were afraid to swallow—now the worms glide down your throat. . . .

[Pause. Raps her temples bitterly.]

But this old clod lingers on . . . no evil fate will have me. Beefstew and potatoes . . . potatoes and beefstew . . . another twenty-five years. The worms are not longing for me. . . . Only for dainties do they get impatient. I am a lean piece of earth, that even they cannot plow. All the fatness has gone out of me, leaving me barren and stony. . . .

[Crosses kitchen to go to ice-box, and catches sight of her husband's back as she passes the doorway. A hard glint comes into her eyes, and her lower lip curls malignantly. She continues, however, opens the ice-box, takes out a dish of raw meat, and starts back with
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it towards the washub. As she reaches the doorway again, she halts and surveys her husband's back. There is a boisterous mockery in her voice, which rings hysterically, however, rather than mockingly.]

Silent, these days . . . three days now that you are silent. What's the matter, my roaring beast? Where has your voice gone to? Sit there, sit there, forever may you sit there, like a tombstone over your daughter. You have devoured her, and now you are silent. . . . But I will not be silent—I have been silent long enough. . . .

[Pause. She goes to her place at the washub—takes some meat out of the dish, and puts it in the pan. Then she starts back with the dish to the ice-box. When she reaches the doorway she halts again, dish in hand.]

You drove her out into the street when I brought her to you. You forbade her to step across your threshold. But a few years—and she came back in spite of you. They carried her over your threshold. Now you are silent . . . gnawing your lips because you have no one to rend. Me you have devoured already . . . long ago. Only a few gray hairs remain. Jacob you tortured till he went out of his mind to escape you. God punished him, you said,
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for lifting a knife against his mother. Because he tore it out of my hands—angered, my gentle one, at seeing me scaling a live fish for the Sabbath.

[*Lowering her voice a moment into a tender dirge.*]

My little lamb, that fell into a lion's lair.

[*Turning on him fiercely.*]

God did not punish my child! You drove him out of his mind! "Don't give him anything else to eat, if he won't eat meat." And when he starved himself rather than touch meat, you forced it down his throat, though he choked at each mouthful. Now when I come to visit him at the asylum, he cries: "Away from me, you witch. Your fingers are knotted in the entrails of a chicken. Send papa to me. I want to see papa!" His beloved papa, that used to lift him by the ears, and dangle him in the air like a puppy, because he mispronounced a vowel-sign in his prayers. Why don't you come, sometimes, papa? Come and take pleasure in your work. See your son—fluttering his arms like wings: "I'm a chicken, I'm a chicken. But I won't let you catch me." Or maybe you'd like to see him lying on the floor, his mouth gasping, his legs quivering like a fish-tail. "I'm a fish, I'm a fish, swimming over-

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night in the bathtub. But you won't eat me to-morrow. In the middle of the night, when no one is looking, I'll open the bathtub stopper, and slip away through the pipes, back, back, to the sea. . . ." You are not interested, I see. You do not even give me a growl. I can't tease you with that morsel. You know it is safe from you on the other side of the bars.

[*Her voice sinks tenderly, and rises accusingly toward the end.*]

My little lamb, that they had to shut up in a cage, because he was too gentle to be let loose in this world of beasts.

[*Turning fiercely on him again.*]

Comfort yourself, comfort yourself! I have still other children left for you to rend. There's Dora. It's time you took to her. But she doesn't tempt you, I know . . . a weak, whimpering thing, that goes to pieces in your hands, before you even touch it. You don't like to handle such shoddy stuff. . . . You content yourself with jeering at her. . . . "Dregs of your mother's womb . . . take that salt-lug mug away from here . . . you look as if you had dug it up out of the garbage can! . . ."

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[*Breaks down, almost weeping.*]

Until the child is ashamed to show her face in the street.

[*With embittered sarcasm.*]

You're particular, eh? You want something nice . . . something strong. . . . How about Harry? He's strong enough . . . what ails *him*? But you are wise, my crafty one. You don't care whether he mispronounces his vowels. You don't care whether he prays altogether. He's a boar, you say, a hopeless heathen. He may even work on the Sabbath to support you. You've solved that problem, my pious one. For a living, a Jew may even keep a pig in the house. Oh, you know which way your bread is buttered—and if the butter is a little lardy, you just pretend not to notice it.

[*Pause. Puts meat dish back in the ice-box, and starts back. Hails again at doorway.*]

Silent, eh? But you are not deaf. You have forgotten to become deaf. . . . Two little chinks in your wall . . . you have forgotten to close them. But I will be merciful. It's hard on you, my poor tiger. No one to turn on in the whole world . . . no one to sharpen your claws on . . . so you have

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sheathed them in despair. I understand. I am not so stupid as you think, my clever one. This dried up cowlop of a head, as you call it, is not altogether dry, you see. Some things still stick to it.

[*Pause. Bends forward toward him.*]

Lost your plaything, didn't you! Somebody took away your plaything. Yes, little boy of mine, she was your plaything . . . a toy under your claws. . . . As long as you could tear at her, you were happy. She was wild, but no wilder than you—you loved to tame her. She was obstinate . . . but where did she get her obstinacy?—you liked her so. You sharpened yourself on it as on a grindstone. Now you have to rust with me the rest of your life. But don't worry. . . . From now on you will be the grindstone — You understand . . . you will be the grindstone for a change. Bestir yourself . . . get ready to turn for me, my grindstone!

[*Pause. Picks some onions from under the washub, and starts peeling them; but stops suddenly.*]

Ha! Ha! A riddle, upon my word. Who can solve my riddle? Three days ago it was a beast . . . to-day it is a carcass. . . . A heavy blow it must have been, a heavy blow to stun such an ox. Who would

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have thought it possible? Something has caked in your heart, eh . . . a hard lump that's settled down there like a stone! Maybe I can stir it up a little, and relieve you.

[*Pause. Steps to the doorway of inner room—in a slow deliberate tone, as if she were seated, telling a story at her ease, she starts.*]

Do you remember the taste of the first beating you gave her? That was a feast for you . . . you ought to remember it. I remember it very well. She was ten years old then . . . but you hadn't laid hands on her before. She was your favorite child. You were proud of her, as you were proud of our handsome red cow, so savage that no one but you could approach it. You petted her, and spoiled her—until the other children feared her, as if she was a gentle. From childhood she had a look and a walk such as no Jewish child ever had. Such wide-open, unflinching eyes, without fear or shame in them . . . such a clear-cut, angry stamp when she walked—like a little colonel! When she strode up to them, other children trembled before her . . . lowered their eyes before her, as before an uplifted whip! But no one dared lay a harsh hand on *her*. . . . When her own grandmother threatened to whip her, because she had choked one of her goslings to death, playing in the barn—you sneered evilly . . . “she

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will whip her, will she?” The next morning, when my mother opened the barn to milk the cow, the other twelve goslings that she was raising for feather-beds for the winter, were lying in a row on the straw, with wrung necks. Ha! Ha! You remember that prank . . . I remember it. . . . I remember another prank of yours. . . . On that St. Nicholas Fair-day, when you came after eleven from the morning service. . . . And you knew all the time that I was crawling around the store in the last week of pregnancy. . . . When I reproached you for coming late, you walked up to the scales, picked up a forty-pounder, and dropped it casually into a two-gross earthenware jar of eggs. . . . In front of a crowded store of peasants who gaped at you. . . . Maybe you have forgotten that little thing . . . but I wrote it down. . . . Ha! Ha! I remind myself more and more of those happy days . . . but I know you want to be refreshed with that beaming. I can recite it for you from beginning to end, with every little ornament that goes with it. “I was three weeks before Passover. . . . I was sitting in the kitchen scraping some beets to pickle for Passover, and she was playing beside me. . . . One of those spring days that come only there . . . snow still on the ground but the air mild already . . . and the earth smelling fresh and warm like a well-leavened Sabbath loaf just from the oven. You had taken out the storm-windows before you left for the store,

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and the pretty paper frost-flowers that we used to stuff between the double windows were scattered around the house. She was sitting on the floor, playing with them. . . . One by one she picked them from the floor, spit on them, and pasted them curiously to her cheeks. . . . But they wouldn't stay, and each time a flower fell off, she picked it up, and tore it carefully petal by petal, as if it were alive. . . . Suddenly who should come in, but you! An evil wind blew you in. But the child was delighted. She picked up two big flowers, spit on them eagerly, and tried to paste them to both her cheeks, so you could see. But the flowers fell off, leaving red smears on her little cheeks. It was like putting on a red blouse for a bull. "What!" you bellowed, "painting yourself already, little harlot?" But the child only looked up at you in surprise—looked at you as she looked at a kitten that meowed when she was plucking out its fur so tenderly. . . . Always surprised that any one should take offense at what she did! "Come here, little harlot!" She came forward curiously, but before she could come up to you, you leaped upon her like a wolf upon a young foal, ripped up her dress, and fell ravenously upon her little buttocks. The child was taken aback at first . . . and then, like a quivering fish, her body started to swish around in your arms. But not a cry escaped her lips, only an angry, furious gasping. "Let her be, let her be," I pleaded, "she is only a

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child." . . . But you threw me aside against the oven. I thought I would faint away watching it. It seemed as if it would never end. You tore every bit of clothing off her . . . you cut her body into strips of flesh . . . and still your finger marks kept crawling over her tender buttocks, like bloated leeches. But you were not through. . . . Finally you were exhausted. . . . You let her drop from your arms . . . but the child leaped to her feet with clenched fists. . . . Face to face you stood gasping at each other, like leashed dogs. "Jew," she hissed out in Russian, stamping her little foot. "Dog of a Jew." My hands jumped to my head. . . . I gripped my brain in astonishment. Where did she get it from . . . my own child addressing its father like a drunken recruit. . . . But you leaped upon her again like a madman. . . . With red eyes bulging in your head like clenched fists, you leaped upon her, and threw her upon the floor. . . . Then with your fists you started kneading her body like a trough of dough. . . . It was my own womb that you were kneading with your knuckles like a trough of dough . . . but I stood by as if my tongue had been chopped off. . . . Until the child's gasping grew fainter and fainter . . . until I couldn't hear it any longer. "You've killed her, you've killed her," I screamed. I wrenched the child from you, caught her up in my arms, and ran out shrieking into

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the street . . . until the whole town turned out, thinking that a pogrom had broken out. . . .

It *was* a pogrom . . . the first pogrom. . . . I brought her back to the house, and put her to bed. You were through with her for a while, but *she* was not through. As soon as she caught her breath, she burst into a wail, and that wail did not stop for two days. Two days and nights, like a bitter wind, it pierced every corner of the house. . . . I never knew a child to take it so. . . .

[*Lowering her voice to a tense whisper.*]

It was as if you had raped her. . . .

[*Pause.*]

On the third day she was not to be found. . . . You were alarmed, but you tried to hide it from me . . . you scoured the town for her, but you couldn't find her. . . . In the afternoon two peasants, customers of ours from down the river, brought her to the store, a lump of mud from head to foot. She had tried to drown herself near the railway trestles, and had gotten stuck in the marshes.

From that time it was war between you. And I . . . I was caught between you. I was a torn rag that you both pulled at. She hated you because you were her enemy . . . but she hated *me* because I was her

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mother. How dared I be her mother! Why couldn't she be the daughter of the lime-kiln owner? Why couldn't she be the doctor's daughter? But she knew my weakness and used it. She hid behind it, threatening to baptize herself, if I didn't give her anything she wanted. Candy and oranges, like the doctor's children, and later on, when she grew older, whole boxes of St. Petersburg bonbons, and sardines. She walked up to the cashdrawer, when you were out, and took the money herself, and I had to lie to you to cover it up. But when you found out, after you were through with her, you turned on me. You didn't beat me, no! You never cared to lay hands on me . . . except when you couldn't help it . . . in bed. But you found other ways of beating me. Winter evenings, when it was so cold that the hand froze to the door latch, you deliberately choked up the fire with ashes, and went away, leaving me without firewood in the house—with four little ones in the house. I had to go out at night and drag a heavy log down from the wood pile, and chop it up myself in the dark, to save them from freezing to death. . . . While you were sitting snug and warm in the synagogue, blackening my father's good name to every one who would listen—that was one way of beating me.

Six years of it . . . you drained my strength away, as through a spigot. You pinched me to the soul, and I had to hold my breath back, lest I cry out.

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Six years, until the town heard from you again. You remember it, don't you? We were on our way to the post-office, to fetch a letter from my brother in America. . . . A warm afternoon, and the Post-office Promenade crowded with betroined couples. Suddenly you spied her in front of us on the promenade, arm in arm with the doctor's son, a silk parasol over her head. I knew where that parasol came from, but it was a brave sight. . . . He in his blue student uniform, and she in a white dress, with the parasol slanting in back of her, like a green hood. You used to take such pride in her,—I thought it would soften your heart. Your eyes brightened, but with that crafty light that I knew so well, like a fisherman who feels a bite at the end of his line. You stole up behind her, and wrenched the parasol suddenly from her grasp. . . . And over her head with it, over her shoulders, over her back, until it broke in half. The boy tried to say something, but you gripped him by the collar of his uniform until his tongue stuck out, and flung him half choked into the roadside. Then by her black braids you dragged her home, all the way from the post-office. The next day the whole town knew why your daughter was in the convent. . . . It cost the community five hundred roubles to get her out of the convent. . . . Five hundred roubles that parasol cost the community.

When you went away to America, I thought I would

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A House of Mourning

be able to lift my head up for a while. But she took your place. *She* became my husband. She is in her grave, now, but what shall I say? She was *your* daughter. You may well mourn over her. She hated you, but she was *your* daughter. I carried her in my womb for you . . . I nursed her with my breasts . . . I shielded her in my arms—receiving your blows for her on my back. But she was not mine. She was no daughter of mine—no sister to her brothers and sisters. She was like a Cossack in the house, who had been quartered on us in punishment. She had her way now, with no one to stop her. I yielded to her, because I was afraid of her. I was terrified by the beauty that was blazing out in her. Redder and redder flamed her cheeks . . . fuller and prouder swelled her bosom . . . and those black eyes of hers began to prance restlessly. Men began to notice her. . . . Officers began following her in the street. I called in the marriage brokers . . . but who would marry a maiden whose own father had called her a thief and a harlot on the public highway? That's why I yielded to her, and she took full advantage. She revenged herself on us for every blow you gave her. The children got out of her way when she was in the house, as if she was mounted on a wild horse. Disdaining to touch them with her hands, with her pretty lacquered boots she would kick them when they got in her way . . . throwing a vile word after each one . . .

[85]

Folk-Plays of the American Jew

"squinting Kalmuk"—"scab-headed Jew-boy"—and to poor Hannah, peace be upon her—"hop along, you lame cat." The children went about in rags, but she was dressed like a countess. Caracul jackets, lacquered boots, galoshes, parasols—you see, there were other parasols in the stores—ten-rouble mother-of-pearl fans. People wondered how I could afford it, and even began to whisper about officers. But it was not true. I supplied the money. I stinted from myself and the children. I mortgaged the store away to usurers. . . . I even used up the passage money you were sending from America. Yes, you may know it now. It was my father's money that paid our passage. Yours went to deck your daughter.

[*Pause.*]

I was happy when you sent for us. I thought here, where no one knew, I would marry her off and be free from her. . . . But the moment your eyes met: "She's not a virgin! That face is not a virgin's! She's been whoring with somebody! Where were you, you old procuress? Why didn't you watch her? Into the street with you, harlot! Don't enter my house!"

[*Pause. She cocks her right hand like a revolver, and stalks forward steadily toward him, like an animal about to spring.*]

[86]

A House of Mourning

When they brought her dead to you, why didn't you look into her face *then*? How did you know what she was doing all these years? Why didn't you examine her and find out? Maybe she had a bastard inside of her! Maybe you buried her with a bastard! Why didn't you find out before putting her in a Jewish—

[*Doorbell rings—she turns reluctantly from her husband, whose back has withstood her assault like a stone wall, and goes to open the door, gazing backwards at him all the time, like an animal cheated out of its prey. Dora enters breathlessly.*]

DORA: Oooo . . . moma, a lotta men downstairs. . . . They wanna see papa.

LEAH [*toward her husband*]: Aha, the Committee of Comfort from the synagogue. Tell them you don't need any comforters. I will comfort you.

[*To Dora, sharply.*]

Where are they?

DORA: Downstairs in the candy store. I was in the candy store, when they asked for Kulak. So I ran up.

LEAH: Idiot! Couldn't you tell them where Kulak

[87]

Folk-Plays of the American Jew

lives! Go, tell your father his brethren are coming to comfort him!

[DORA hesitates. LEAH gives her a push that sends her to the doorway of inner room.]

Go, he won't eat you.

[Raps her own gums savagely with her knuckles.]

He's lost his teeth.

DORA [goes over to her father fearfully]: Papa, they wanna see you.

[Pause. No reply.]

Papa.

[Touches him timidly with her hand.]

Oooo, moma. Something the matter with papa.

LEAH [comes in slowly and curiously]: Something the matter?

[Approaches, bends over him with her index finger pointed as if to poke him, and suddenly starts back.]

Dead!

[88]

A House of Mourning

[With wild triumph, as if suddenly reminded of something.]

"The gray mare outruns the red stallion." You used to comfort me with that when I was sick. "The gray . . .

[Doorbell rings. Walks mechanically to open it, continuing to herself.]

mare outruns the red stallion."

[Stops short suddenly near the door, and turns slowly back to him. Bends over him ahead. With stupefied astonishment as the fact begins to penetrate her consciousness.]

Dead . . . dead . . .

[Suddenly bethinking herself fearfully, as if she had lost something.]

You . . . didn't . . . hear me . . .

[Doorbell rings again. Dora runs to open it.]

CURTAIN

[89]

Mr. Brody has for several years been a contributor to a wide range of magazines including THE DIAL, MCCALL'S, THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, THE AMERICAN MERCURY, THE NATION, HEARST'S EVERYBODY'S, and THE OUTLOOK. He is the author of A FAMILY ALBUM, and was a contributor to the first edition of THE AMERICAN CARAVAN.

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WITH
NAT FERBER

LAMENTATIONS, Four
Folk-Plays of the
American Jew, by Al-
ter Brody; with frontispiece
by Hugo Gellert; published
by Coward-McCann, Inc.

... Brody is a poet who writes
good plays, too;
... to a

three, or even four, does.
Alter Brody is not of those who
make of word economy a virtue.
He makes of this economy an art
—expressing as he does in a sen-
tence or a phrase that which the
average writer strives to express
in an entire play.

The four folk plays are very
properly offered under the general
title, LAMENTATIONS. It seems
to us that Brody has a way of
fitting the right word to every oc-
casion. LAMENTATIONS. This
sums up the state of being of the
unassimilated Jew. It sums up his
unending cry, this wall that has
echoed through the ages. There
is variety in this lament, too.

LOWING IN THE NIGHT is
characterized by its author "an in-
visible play." It is, of course, just
that. We are listening to a man
and woman, husband and wife,
who drift from the querulous to
the ardently affectionate in the
darkness of their bedroom. She
has failed him — that, what ...

We say "outwardly" because he
conceals at all times, unless roused,
his chagrin at his failure of
achieving fatherhood. This, de-
spite his knowledge that the fault
is hers. He turns to her, af-
fectionately. She turns from him,
cognizant, at all times, of her
failure. His is a song of hope.
Her's is one long lament. She
had been to physicians, had been
pawed over by them; had sub-
mitted to operations. Failure!
Her heart yearned but her body
denied her the happiness of
woman's—the Jewish woman's—
most important function. She is
in disgrace, she insists, the de-
spised of all, even of her mother
who stares upon her reproachfully.
He seeks to console her and is
moved to amatory desires by their
propinquity. His longing conquers
for a moment and then he is
driven off—a beast. A play of
love and yearning, poignant—a
lament.

This play was first published
in the 1927 edition of the AMERI-
CAN CARAVAN, and was one of
the finest things in that memorable
anthology.

Whether the other three appear
in this year's CARAVAN we do
not know, having as yet not seen
it. But they are equally powerful,
fine.

FOR MEMORIALS, is

enacted by two aged wo-
men in the gallery of a syna-
gogue. One laments the fact that her
daughter is in an insane asylum,
driven to madness by a poet. The
other, consoling her, acknowledges
that she, too, has her sorrows.
She is mother to a poet. If her
evaluation of the species is some-
what out of date, even in the
ghetto, it none the less offers a
true insight into the mental pro-
cesses of certain unlettered. The
theme to our mind is not strictly
Jewish. Irish and Swedish parents
have supported sons whose efforts
stopped at poetry, but the reac-
tions to be expected of the Jewish
parent are truthfully recorded.

RAPUNZEL, the story of a girl
that has gone blind, is a fine
imaginative bit. A HOUSE OF
MORNING, the fourth play, is as
fine and yet as powerful as James
Stephens' DESIRE. Although this
playlet and Stephens' story are en-
tirely different there is an insistent
something which recalls the work
of the author of CROCK OF
GOLD.

Brody is of those writing from
the Jewish scene who is really able
to translate into English the lan-
guage of this scene without mar-
ring its color. He is of those who
can accomplish this without ruin
to the most subtle nuance. To read
Brody in the English is to under-
stand the route by which thoughts
are conceived in the Yiddish. He
is, in short, a very fine artist.